ACDICT ALTA survey of Assessment Benchmarking April 2018

Comments on the survey results – Chris Johnson

It is noticeable that answer came from 24 cases of participation in peer benchmarking of assessment. (not necessarily all from different universities, but at least 19).The majority of the benchmarking was in the period 2013-16, it is not visible whether the frequency of benchmarking is the same in 2017-18.

Type of assessment benchmarked
Most benchmarking is final year projects and materials (10 cases), and written examinations (8). Programming assessment is least frequent (2 cases).

Cost
The cost of doing benchmarking varied widely, from 2 to 14 work days. This question yielded few answers: evidently the cost of doing benchmarking was not accounted for or not remembered in most cases.

Choice of peer/partner
The most common partners were in a common university network (G08, ATN, RUN etc) (9 cases) and the school's own choice (6 cases). This answer goes towards answering the implied question of what is the comparable benchmark – who are our peers? and avoids the implied issue of where (and whether) a benchmark level should be placed across the whole university sector.

Outcomes – did anything change as a result?
The answers gave a satisfactory result for proponents of benchmarking as a form of formative review: changes were made to methods of assessment (5 cases) and the style or content of a subject (7 cases).

Conclusion
The outcomes suggest that the benchmarking of assessment is widespread though not universal in ICT in Australian universities. It has an effect leading to modifications in assessment and in curriculum (presumably in the direction of improvement). Unlike other disciplines benchmarking in ICT has been done for first year subjects as well as final years, presumably building on the long-running interest in research and practice for the significant, common hurdle of learning introductory programming.

What else could be learned? Are there significant differences in grading standards (and do we want to expose and discuss them, in the politicised context of the Australian university system?) Has there been grade creep over time, leading to weaker graduates? Or the reverse – have standards in fact improved over time?

A further survey with more detailed questions about comparisons of assessment and grading could yield results indicating differences in grading standards between universities, and could enable some analysis as to whether these were random or systematic. To gather more than anecdotal indicative evidence a coherent framework for reporting the outcomes of assessment benchmarking would need to be instituted to enable any such conclusions. Previous reports from peer assessment benchmarking by the Go8 QVS and ACED (Australian

Council of Engineering Deans) show that there were few surprises or differences in the grading standards in those selected disciplines. The computing disciplines are perhaps less coherent and have less mature history than engineering, but the relationship to industrial employment for ICT graduates is as strong as it is for engineering, and provides a similar pragmatic benchmark of graduates' competence that has proved satisfactory.

The results here do not suggest that university academics are concerned about grade inflation in Australia, despite the "worldwide trends" reported in Times Higher Education ("Is grade inflation a worldwide trend?" THE online June 28, 2018. "Three-quarters of students in the UK now receive 'good' degrees, compared with just half 20 years ago.") The question of grade inflation or falling standards was not asked in this survey, and there is no data to assess it objectively: Australian universities do not publicly report data such as grade distribution of final year subjects, for example, unlike English universities' distribution of honours grades [Blachan 2017]. Individual academics' memories from the period of the external examiner model of benchmarking of fourth year honours standards that was briefly instituted in computer science in Australian universities do not indicate any major concerns about differences in standards or creep over time (the original recommendations for this practice are now lost, it is no longer widespread, and no formal reporting or evaluation was gathered).

The UK study states that one cause of grade inflation is "increased pressure on institutions to do well in domestic league tables." The same pressure may be growing in the Australian system. The metric of rates of attrition/graduation is published in QILT as a student recruitment driver, and comparative rates are exposed and commented on by government education ministers and threatened as a future determinant of funding. Allied with dubious assumptions that attrition rates are a credible or useful quality indicator, despite the study showing that only a small part of the variance can be explained by known measures [*Final Report – Improving retention, completion and success in higher education,* Higher Education Standards Panel, DET 2018], or that "not employed in field" (a graduate being employed in a different "specialisation" from their base degree) constitutes a waste or inefficiency in their education.

Should we be concerned about benchmarking? Without further information we have no objective evidence to wield in the confused, largely subjective debate. Some elements of industry have expressed views that graduates in ICT are not competent; others are very satisfied. Government comments may catch hold of such comments. Running benchmarking of assessment might provide data for the debate, and can be used to improve the internal quality assurance within the discipline, even though reporting data publicly might not fully alleviate the public criticisms. The Australian Computer Society ACS as the professional accreditation body has not reported concern about declining standards or inappropriate educational directions (though its accreditation requirement that the quality assurance include benchmarking of degree programs is not strongly observed).

The industry criticisms may stem as much from short supply of graduates (leading to perceptions of poor quality for employers at the end of the recruitment queue) and of changing expectations and a generation gap between employers and new graduates. The corrective action may lie with improved opportunities for more students to engage in structured, assessed work experience before graduation, rather than with modifying marking standards in academic areas of their programs.

Simon Baker's THE article has an informative section on Australia:

> Another interesting case study is Australia. Like England, students there pay a significant chunk of their degree costs through income-contingent loans. But while this may be set to change with the government's planned introduction of league tables likely to draw on the country's existing Student Engagement Survey, academics there are not currently judged to any serious extent on the basis of student feedback. And there is scant evidence of rising grades.
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> However, the extent to which this merely reflects a lack of published data on grading is unclear. There are no sector-wide datasets on university grades, partly because there is no uniform grading system. For instance, the University of Melbourne uses a similar honours classification system to the UK, but other universities use grades such as "distinction" and "high distinction" – but often with different score boundaries.
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> The only data published by the federal government that show a measure of student performance relate to the proportion of students who pass their courses.
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> These data show no real changes over time in pass rates at different institutions. However, without complete data transparency it is difficult to conclude definitively that the country is immune to grade inflation.

How important is the debate? What should ACDICT do? There are contested political and social arguments about the grades, relevance, and utility of university education in the ICT disciplines. The Council of Deans of ICT should consider how important these debates are, and whether to engage in these public discussions. It should consider what information and evidence it needs and can gather from its members to support and inform its individual and collective decisions about curriculum and standards. To engage in the public debate the Council might consider public statements in collaboration with the ACS to affirm the importance of accreditation and the resulting professional standards; and might engage with ACS to review and revise the accreditation standards; and progress engagement with AIIA as representing employer and industry concerns.